

Nostalgia in blue: On visiting Viviana Peretti's camera obscura

By Caroline Brothers

Stepping into Viviana Peretti's *camera obscura* is to step into memory before it becomes memory, to witness the very process by which memory is made. The immense poetic beauty of the images she produces with it feels unmediated, the product of a medium whose existence is predicated like no other upon nostalgia. These photographs take you back in time – into our own deep time when all we had were raw impressions, before we had tools like words or art or language with which to make sense of the world.

Part machine, part installation, Peretti's *camera obscura* is neither, yet at the same time both. It is reminiscent of the world's earliest cameras, used as an aid for drawing until the 1820s when, like Peretti, a Frenchman called Nicéphore Niépce saw its potential for creating images with the sun.

But where the camera of Niépce's time was simply a box, Peretti's version is literally a chamber, a *dark room* that you can enter, sit down in or walk around. An installation of her own devising, it is also fittingly ephemeral, since it will be taken apart and vanish when she leaves.

Niépce's *camera obscura* was a box with a hole in it that used sunlight to produce the world's first photograph – a grainy black and white image that took shape on a light-sensitive surface after an exposure that took at least eight hours. It reproduced what he saw through his window, most likely from the attic in Burgundy where he carried out his experiments: a view of stone walls and a roof, now known as 'View from the window at Le Gras.' The image he finally fixed he called a *heliograph* – a drawing made with the sun, unaware in those revolutionary times that he stood at the dawn of a revolution himself.

Peretti cobbled together her *camera obscura* from found objects that she pulled together in a summer chalet at the bottom of a garden, on a coastline ragged with subsidence on the edge of the Mediterranean sea. She used black plastic bags and cellotape, pieces of cardboard and sheets of paper recycled by a local business in the village where she happened to be working, on Italy's Ligurian coast.

You knock, she opens the door to let you into the chamber and you stand there, made vulnerable by the darkness you're stepping into, sensorily deprived. She guides you to a chair while your eyesight struggles to adjust after the afternoon glare outdoors. After a moment, she retracts the cover over a tiny hole she has made in the blacked-out window, and in pours the blinding white light.

It projects onto a screen she has hung there, great sheets of crumpled white paper, in places mended and torn. They hang like bed-sheets on the laundry lines of her childhood, giving texture to the wash of pinhole light.

A moment later the eye begins its work of distinguishing, of striving to interpret and understand. Before it hover shadows and forms that seemed conjured without context, like the earliest impressions on the retina of an infant in the first months of their life.

All that is visible to you is shadow play: broad shapes in black on white. Slowly, however, your eye begins to make sense of things. You see branches, then twigs and leaves, and lines that might be railings, but still you feel disoriented; you cannot see where you stand. At the same time, the soft white wash is changing. It becomes grey with a silver sheen in it before you realise that in one corner the sheen is moving – and suddenly your mind lurches and you begin to see. Before you, upside down and caught by the hanging sheeting, sprawls the vast, breeze-rippled Mediterranean. There's that rock-island in the sea beyond the trees and the railings, an ashtray someone has left on a concrete pillar, the water twinkling in the afternoon sun.

I hadn't expected the twinkling; for some reason, an image magically moving was not what I had foreseen. But then, I realise, we are inside the *camera obscura*, and what is projected onto Peretti's screen is life as it appears inside the eye of the camera – before time stops when the shutter is pressed.

And yet that life seems so strange. The world concentrated in that beam of light may be alive and moving, but it is one flipped into reverse and turned on its head. It takes me a moment to understand that the upside-down, back-to-front image is the world as it appears to us on the retina before the brain 'corrects' it, before cells at the back of the eye dissect the spectrum into light waves and let the colours in.

My eye cannot detect the full spectrum of colour inside Peretti's *camera obscura*. But her camera, its mechanical eye mounted on its tripod beside us in the chamber, can manage it, and in the long-exposure images she captures there, it brings the colours back.

And the colour it brings us is blue. As the April sun sinks towards the horizon, it brings us the blue of the Mediterranean in the late afternoon: a softer version of the aquamarine sea and the cobalt glow of the sky.

For the past two decades Peretti has lived far from Italy: in landlocked Bogotá, and among the glass and concrete corridors of New York. The urban blue of these other worlds is different: it may be sullied by pollution, or glimpsed in tranches between the skyscrapers that frame the horizon and keep it at bay. She travels, she photographs, often in black and white. But when she considers her homeland, which is another way of speaking about her origins, what comes to her is not language or monuments or politics, nor taste or scent or even the faces of its people. Instead it is this colour, which on this April day in Liguria engulfs you and enfolds you in a double dose of blue, from sea and sky.

Blue is the colour of her father's Sardinia, the colour of her childhood summers, the colour of nostalgia for home. It is the place she carries inside her when she

moves through foreign landscapes. It is an emotion and a sensory awareness, and it travels much further than sound, much further than light.

To stand among the shadows inside Peretti's *camera obscura* feels like looking at memory itself, in reverse and upside down, mysterious and strange. It is like a telescope that looks back in time to the origins of the universe, to that point inside us where our first memories took shape, flickering, ungraspable, in the time where we moved without words.

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